The recruitment of VET teachers and the failure of policy in England's further education sector

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Abstract

England's further education (FE) sector has been characterised by instability and policy churn for at least three decades during which time reform of vocational education and training (VET) has been piled on top of reform, with few resulting in lasting change. In the context of another ambitious new reform of VET in England, this article reports on a study that examined the chronic difficulties in recruiting teachers of vocational science, engineering and technology (SET) to FE colleges. We argue that these difficulties in recruiting SET teachers reveal persistent weaknesses in policy planning for the English VET sector and help to explain the serial failure of VET policy in England.

Keywords: vocational education and training; further education colleges; policy; skills

Introduction

This article reports on a study that revealed the chronic difficulties in recruiting vocational teachers to England's further education (FE) colleges, during a time when the government is attempting to implement wide-ranging reform of the whole vocational education and training (VET) system. It seeks to explain this difficulty at two levels: from the perspective of the managers in colleges attempting to recruit vocational teachers; and then how their specific problems in recruitment connect to and illuminate wider policy-making in the sector. Concerns about the shortage of teachers in schools have been well documented (see for example, European Commission 2018 for European Union countries) but the availability of VET teachers has been neglected. That same kind of neglect is apparent even in policy documents that focus on VET systems, some of which ignore the very teachers and trainers that make those systems function (Orr 2019). There are exceptions at the supranational level, however. In *Learning for Jobs,* the OECD (2010, 91) noted that "the quality of the teaching and training profession is critical to effective learning in vocational programmes" and similarly the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (Cedefop 2009, 111) proclaims that "teachers, trainers and other VET professionals are the ground agents of change" for a modernized European VET system (see also Cedefop 2014). Behind these statements, nevertheless, there is in many countries a dearth of information about VET staff compared to their counterparts in schools. Cedefop (2009, 115) have identified that throughout Europe, "Poor data availability on VET professionals makes it impossible to provide a comprehensive statistical picture of the VET workforce and of the various challenges it faces" and the OECD (2010, 96) reached the conclusion that "in many countries data on the VET teacher and trainer workforce are weak".

In part to address that concern, our study sought to better understand issues around the recruitment and retention of one group of VET practitioners in England, who are teachers and

trainers of vocational science, engineering and technology (SET) in FE colleges. Henceforth this group are referred to as teachers in this article. Our particular focus was on engineering. FE colleges are where the majority of vocational courses in England are offered, including some higher education courses, though they also have significant academic provision. Most students are aged 16-19 but colleges are also where most education for adults takes place. The sector is characterised by instability; Fleckenstein and Lee's (2018) analysis of the political economy of VET policy in England exposes serial failure to bring about lasting reform. They blame successive governments' industrial policies, which have consistently emphasised the supply side of skills for industry and neglected the demand side for those skills and investing in jobs. With the same kind of complaints about policy failure and policy churn, the UK's Institute for Government cited the FE sector as an acute example of the British government's "tendency to recreate policies and organisations on an alarmingly regular basis" (Norris and Adam 2017, 3). Since the early 1980s there have been 28 major pieces of legislation that related to VET; there have been at least 48 secretaries of state with relevant responsibility; and no sector organisation has lasted more than a decade (ibid., 5). This study was aimed at examining a microcosm of that frequently overlooked serial failure, through examining the recruitment of VET teachers, in order to better understand how the failure recurs. Data for the study was gathered in the spring and summer of 2017 at a time when the UK government was initiating yet another sweeping new skills policy that centered on the FE sector, the Post-16 Skills Plan (DfE 2016). This initiative, like so many before, promises major reforms of VET in England including entirely new courses and qualifications, this time called T-levels. The ministerial forward to the Skills Plan typifies the expectations placed on the English VET, for economic development as well as social transformation.

> The economic case for further reform of the skills system is compelling. Bringing training for young people and adults in line with the needs of business and industry will

> drive up productivity, which has lagged behind in this country even as economic growth and employment have improved. But for a One Nation government there is a strong moral case for reform, too. Sustained and skilled employment leads to prosperity for individuals. (ibid., 5)

Based on the experience of the past three decades these expectations are unlikely to be achieved and one significant reason for that failure is that these expectations are poorly aligned with the position or potential of the existing VET teaching workforce to enact the reforms. The government's policy explicitly refers to international comparisons to demonstrate the need for change in England's skills sector but closer to home it overlooks the very people who are required to implement that policy. In focusing on VET teachers this article, therefore, also illuminates one specific factor in the serial failure of policy to bring about lasting reform in English VET and for the consequent policy churn that Norris and Adam (2017) and Fleckenstein and Lee (2018) identified.

The Post-16 Skills Plan being implemented by the government derived directly from the report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (otherwise known as the Sainsbury Report after its Chair, David Sainsbury). That report acknowledged that, "Good technical education requires expert teachers and lecturers" (Sainsbury 2016, 16) but problems with recruiting these experts is relegated to a single sentence later in the document:

> College principals have told us that recruiting technical education teachers with well-developed pedagogical skills, mastery of their field, and up-to-date industry experience can be a significant challenge in the competitive labour market.
>
> (Sainsbury 2016, 66)

The study described in this article responded to that sentence and, uniquely, investigated that challenge more closely by seeking the perceptions of those with responsibility for the

recruitment and retention of engineering teachers at some of the largest further education colleges in England. Courses associated with Engineering and manufacturing technologies are among the three largest areas of provision in English FE alongside Arts, media and publishing and Health, public services and care, as categorised by the Education and Training Foundation, which is the official body with responsibility for the sector (ETF 2018, 6). Teachers of Engineering and manufacturing technologies account for 9.3% of the teaching workforce (ibid., 52). Colleges in the sector are also very diverse, due to their distinctive local settings and histories so any generalisations need be made with great caution. Nevertheless, our study's findings suggest that national demand for engineering courses from students is generally stable or rising and so the demand for engineering teachers that we are examining is likely to persist. Problems associated with recruiting SET teachers and especially engineering specialists are therefore likely to restrict the government's ambitions for their Skills Plan.

Data collection

Data for the study was collected through semi-structured phone interviews of about 15 minutes or questionnaires emailed to representatives of human resources (HR) and engineering departments (or equivalent) at 24 of the largest FE colleges in England by total income (based on 2014-2015 figures). Individual contacts within the college were identified via the switchboard and/or the department in question. Initially, the HR department was approached and if interviews were achieved, participants were asked for details of the most suitable contact in engineering. Where the HR contact did not result in an interview, the head of engineering was identified via the college switchboard. Departments that did not respond to the invitation to be interviewed, could not be contacted by phone or were not in the phone sample because of the time and budget constraints of the project, were sent a link to an online survey and invited to complete it. The fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2017. Staff in the

engineering departments were most willing to take part in the study, which is best illustrated by the response to the online survey. Requests to complete it were emailed to 35 HR departments (13 to generic email addresses, the rest to named individuals) and 37 members of engineering departments (all named individuals). Only five did so (7% response rate), and they were exclusively engineering staff.

There were 31 participants in total (a response rate of 31%), as follows:

- 13 HR phone interviews
- 11 Engineering phone interviews
- 1 Engineering face-to-face interview
- 1 HR written response
- 5 Engineering online surveys

In seven cases both the HR and Engineering departments of the same college participated, and the answers have been combined to provide one institutional return where relevant, giving a base of 24 colleges. Reconciliation of figures was necessary when the two responses did not match, maybe because HR provided an overview across vocational subjects more widely or across a merged group of colleges, whereas the engineering participant represented just one department at one institution.

By the end of the data collection period, no significant new themes were emerging, suggesting we had reached saturation in identifying the main issues involved in the recruitment and retention of this group of teachers for these large colleges. We would have liked to have achieved more representation of certain regions (most notably the south including London) and of the top 10 colleges by total income. Although later efforts focused on these colleges, they proved particularly difficult to recruit to the research. Our final sample consisted of 10 northern colleges (out of 18 in the full list), 10 in the midlands (out of 15) and 4 in the south (out of 17).

Five of the top ten colleges by income were represented, and as far as it was possible to judge with limited information, the sample achieved was a reasonable reflection of English colleges in relation to type of setting (inner city, suburban, rural).

Table 1 shows that, even though the sample was drawn from the largest 50 colleges, the engineering departments were a range of sizes. To some extent, this was determined by the particular college's definition of engineering, especially whether it included motor vehicle trades and/or construction. Some colleges, although large overall, had small numbers of engineering students, and a few had only just set up their engineering provision.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

HR interviewees mainly referred to engineering in their answers despite being asked about vocational science and technology subjects as well as engineering. Engineering covered a broad range of disciplines including mechanical, civil and electrical engineering, electronics, motor vehicle and construction, and less commonly areas such as aerospace and process manufacturing. There were different pressures on staffing in the various strands of engineering dependent on the location of the college.

Engineering interviewees were asked what courses they offered. Most colleges had between 11 and 20 courses covering a range of levels, particularly 1, 2 and 3. The largest two were running over 30 courses from Entry level up to Higher National Diploma (HND) at Level 5. The occupational areas ranged from aerospace to refrigeration, with motor vehicle and electrical being the most frequently mentioned. In most organisations, construction (including brickwork, plastering, joinery) was treated as a separate though related area.

About three-quarters of the individuals interviewed had served in the college for three years or more, with 12 out of the 31 having worked there for over ten years. Nevertheless, two-thirds of them were new to their current role, having been in it less than three years (Table 2).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Nine out of the 17 engineering interviewees headed up either the department or a wider division. The rest described themselves as programme or curriculum leaders. Identifying the appropriate respondent in HR was more problematic and was often decided by the switchboard operator, HR reception or whoever looked after the generic HR email account. Table 3 shows our estimate as to the equivalent seniority level of the participants. These two tables indicate that our data represents the perceptions of people who have had significant experience and well as current significant responsibility for recruitment and retention in the sample colleges both strategically and operationally.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Discussion of main findings

In presenting our findings we are providing a general view of the situation for the recruitment and retention of, especially, engineering teachers at 24 large colleges in England, but the caveat about the local diversity of FE colleges remains. The quotes from participants have been selected to reflect or illustrate the specific findings. Different colleges had different precise experiences but all participants agreed that recruiting to engineering was difficult.

They are what we class as 'difficult to recruit to' positions so we often have to re-advertise. Very rarely do we recruit on the first attempt (HR, North)

There were many more mentions of having to re-advertise jobs, and in some cases not even advertising directly in the first place:

> *I have gone out to advert for several jobs, the application numbers are generally very low, generally between three and six, of which a number of times I haven't interviewed any. And I have never interviewed more than two for a post.* (Eng, North)

> *Well, like I said, the main issue is that they [job applicants] just don't appear. They're actually just not physically there; so we'll advertise a job and, like I said, sometimes you'll get no applicants, and that'll have been out for weeks.* (HR, Mids)

Two HR participants were initially more sanguine than the others. For one, the struggle to recruit engineering staff was dwarfed by the difficulty in finding computing teachers to cover growth areas such as web development and gaming. A second said "*we don't actually struggle too much with them areas, it tends to be as I mentioned the mathematics posts*". She recognised this was unusual ("*I have worked at other colleges that have struggled, particularly in those vocational and engineering departments*"). Moreover, once she included construction, she modified her response: "*that is where we tend to have a lot more difficulty, i.e. electrical, wood occupations, that sort of thing we do have some difficulty fulfilling them roles*" (HR, Mids). Likewise, for many other colleges the problem was more acute in certain specific subject areas than in others, usually those that fitted within construction; electrical trades and plumbing were the most commonly mentioned. Generally, participants reported that it was more difficult to recruit teachers for the higher-level courses since applicants themselves needed higher qualifications to apply for the posts.

When asked to itemise the reasons for struggling to recruit, there was general consensus that the main problem was pay. The median salary for Engineering and manufacturing technologies teachers was £32,100 in 2016-17, very similar to that of teachers in other areas in FE (ETF

2018, 56). In most of the SET occupational areas mentioned by participants, staff could, apparently, receive higher remuneration in their industry. For instance, this engineering and construction programme lead had approached someone recently graduated from her part-time teacher training course with the offer of teaching and assessing work:

> *He's on £32,000, and bear in mind, I'd be starting him on £27,000 … So, you know, it's a no brainer … the other ones I've taught in the past, they're on £45-50 grand now in the industry.* (Eng, North)

The relatively low pay rather than the nature of the job as a teacher being the main obstacle to successful recruitment was repeated elsewhere:

> *…it is not everybody that can accommodate a 20% or 25% or 30% reduction in salary to take up a new post. It basically filters out right at the very front end of the recruitment process a large proportion of people who could or may wish to do the job, because they look at the salary and think yes interesting, sounds an interesting job, but can't afford to take the drop in pay basically.* (Eng, North)

This tension was often presented as a competition between education and industry over individual employees, which might have calamitous effects even to the existing staffing in a college. A boom in local industry can drive up demand for vocational courses as potential students want a qualification which will enable them to apply for local jobs, but the staff necessary to teach them might have been tempted away from the college by the lure of alternative, better-remunerated employment:

> *A large housing project started last week in [region], to which we lost three carpenters all in one day […] Well, that's the trouble with FE. FE's completely driven in that way. When a story gets in the paper about, you know, the £100,000 for bricklaying, or*

whatever, then everyone wants to be a bricklayer, but it's at the time when the market's at its highest, so you find it hard to employ staff. (HR, South)

The OECD (2010) has also recognized that the prospect of a fall in salary from their former occupation inhibits recruitment of vocational teachers. Not just in England are few colleges unable to offer salaries commensurate with the private sector, though there are exceptions. In Switzerland, with its high profile and high-status VET system, salaries at vocational schools are competitive with average salaries elsewhere in the economy. Those who become VET teachers in Switzerland mostly anticipate earning more not less than they had done in their previous occupation (Hof and Strupler Leiser 2014, 1). With some candour the OECD also recognized that the global recession from 2008 made working in colleges or other VET providers more attractive as private sector jobs had become less secure. The OECD recommended that VET systems should take this opportunity of insecurity to employ teachers (OECD 2010, 92-93). Neither this opportunity nor this opportunism were apparent in our data, however.

Participants in our study remarked that applicants for SET teaching posts were not only expected to take a wage cut, but they were often required to fulfil a more onerous role than in their previous employment. Actual working conditions could also be very dissimilar, with those used to working alone now expected to spend time interacting with their students:

...you're now going to earn less money, you know, you're not going to be alone, you're going to have to converse and communicate with other people and there's a whole heap of bureaucracy and things which are attached to teaching. (Eng, North)

they end up leaving very quickly because teaching is hard, you know, it's not all warm indoors and no heavy lifting. (Eng, North)

Participants in engineering departments were aware of the personal and cultural adjustment that would be required to make the transformation from a practitioner to a teacher.

> *…it's hard when colleges recruit people who've got all this industry experience, that's fantastic, but what colleges tend to need more now is people who've got education experience in teaching as well […] knowing the paperwork for the awarding body, the paper the college expects filled in. It's a different skill set really, isn't it?* (Eng, Mids)

This perception chimes with the OECD's (2014, 60) conclusion that vocational teachers have responsibilities that are more challenging than teachers of academic subjects. VET teachers not only need occupational knowledge and experience, they also need to know how to teach.

Staff turnover

Turnover was described as much less of a problem than initial recruitment. As shown in Table 4, nearly all the respondents able to estimate turnover said it was under 15% and half of those said less than 10%, which reflects what the ETF have found based on statistical data. For the year 2016-17 staff turnover in 'Learner-facing technical staff' was 11% (ETF 2018, 22). It could be more pronounced in certain disciplines (three participants once again singled out construction) and even relatively low turnover could cause issues where it was very challenging to replace the leavers. The only college with a very high turnover (estimated at between a third and a half) explained: "*…that is because we are running lots of courses, and it has become a situation where most of our staff now is agency staff* (Eng, South)."

The use of agencies is discussed later. More commonly, however, participants explained that turnover of staff was low because once they managed to get staff the colleges were determined to keep them:

… I'm a soft manager. I do everything I can to keep the staff happy so that we don't lose staff. I used to say that once you came to work at [name of college], you didn't leave, because you'll never work anywhere as good. (Eng, North)

Obviously, you can never tell what is coming around the corner, but we pay well, we look after staff as well as we possibly can, and I am not hearing anything that is kind of itchy feet. We are an "outstanding" college as well… (Eng, South)

Several of the interviewees had themselves worked in other colleges previously, but there was little evidence that movement between colleges was a major issue. Nonetheless, it could cause serious frustration:

At the moment, we're advertising for a plumber. It's just gone back out to re-advertise for the third time, and I've got one applicant, and it's the guy who actually left us to go to another college, and now he wants to come back. After three months. And he's going to have to give three months' notice where he's gone to. And it's taken me the last three months to try and get somebody in place. […] It's driving me absolutely mad. He's the only person I've got for interviewing […] and I had two posts going. (Eng, North)

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The role of staff or recruitment agencies

Nearly all colleges were using agency staff in some capacity and the prominence of agencies in the perception of participants became obvious in the first interviews. Thereafter, we specifically sought information about the use of agencies. Only three out of the 16 colleges asked the question claimed not to use agencies, and participants from two of these three later

admitted to doing so, but only if desperate. Colleges' relationships with agencies were described as being generally uncomfortable and reluctant, based on a pressing need to maintain adequate provision for students. There was, though, recognition that agencies were a valuable resource to manager acute staffing issues such as to cover sick leave or to bridge the gap between one contract finishing and another starting. However, it was much more common to describe the high cost of using agency staff in relation to their hourly fees and, when colleges wanted to recruit an individual on a more permanent basis, the fee they had to pay the agency:

> *if I get a good agency staff, and they fit the bill and they fit in well with the team, and we have got the numbers to consolidate a full-time position, then we sometimes do recruit. But then you have got an agency finder's fee, which is usually between 20%-40% of the salary offered, and again you are looking at £5,000-£7,000, on top of your normal recruiting costs*. (Eng, North)

Participants agreed that the quality of staff recruited through agencies was variable but resentment about the high cost of agency staff was exacerbated if the individual was later found to have exaggerated their qualifications or experience:

> *I think some agencies tend to inflate the contents of CVs, and they are not actually what it says on the ticket when they come and work for you.* (Eng, South)

Another major disadvantage with agency staff was their perceived lack of commitment and accountability to the college, mainly arising from the terms of their contract, which were for teaching hours only. Agency staff were thus excluded from attending college open days or parents' evenings, for example, and that laid more responsibility back onto the directly employed college-based staff.

In certain regions and occupational areas where demand for staff greatly outstripped supply, institutions had no choice but to use agencies, even if they were expensive:

> *it is difficult when the skills that we're after are so rare, and once people are signed with an agency, we can't get them*. (HR, South)

In one particularly extreme case, a college was having to pay for agency staff to come from out of area because of their recruitment crisis:

> *So we have taken on some agency staff and transferred them onto permanent contracts, and paid the agency fees so we have done that recently, but others come from down south, and then we have to pay the agency a higher rate of pay to compensate for the fact that they are having to be in a B&B or hotel or something.* (HR, North)

There were some examples of aggressive agency practices. One agency poached back someone whose current engagement it had recently organised:

> *I got a plumber in last year, who came from agency, started with us, was really - well, promised me the earth. Was here three months, then the agency rang him up and found him a job somewhere else. And he went off there, but I paid a £7,000 finder's fee for him, to the same agency.* (Eng, North)

Two of the colleges involved in the study had set up agencies in-house to relieve short-term problems. Even then they had to engage an outside agency for the harder-to-recruit positions. For none of the participants were agencies a sustainable solution to the problems of recruiting staff.

Teaching qualifications

Participants representing nine out of the 17 colleges able to furnish an answer estimated that between a fifth and a third of their recruits were new to teaching. Three more put the proportion at 50%, and three said none of them. At all the colleges when a new member of staff had no teaching qualification they had to acquire one, often within 3 years of joining. The majority insisted on a Level 5 Certificate of Education or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) teaching qualification (13 out of 23 answering), with most of the rest divided between Level 4 or Level 3 teaching awards. Some differed according to the teaching commitment: for examples, in one college it was the Level 4 diploma for part-time teachers but the Certificate in Education if they taught more than 30 hours per week. In another, the engineering department respondent said staff must have a PGCE, whereas the HR position was that in hard-to-recruit vocational SET areas they would take someone with a Level 3 teaching qualification who was willing to work towards Level 4.

Funding arrangements for teacher education courses also varied. Those colleges that ran the qualification themselves tended to fund tuition, often with a claw-back if staff left within a certain period after completion of the course. Other recruits were expected to fund themselves through the student loan scheme. There were cases of joint funding. In a handful of cases support was decided on a case-by-case basis, determined by factors such as how desperate the college was for the person, or how much the department had left in its budget. The main challenge faced by staff trying to complete their teaching qualification was judged to be pressure of time, especially when they were simultaneously coping with a new career:

> *Teaching is hard, learning the craft is hard, learning the craft, doing the craft, you know, having a life and studying is hard.* (Eng, Mids)

[The teaching training course] takes up so much of their time, doing their studying, the reading, their assignments. Obviously as well as trying to get to grips with their new job and things, so yes, there are barriers yes. (HR, North)

Participants from several colleges did not perceive any barriers to completing the qualification and there were reports of college support mechanisms as well as enjoyment of the course averting potential problems:

So, the courses are run over in the evening, so it doesn't collide with any timetabling provisions or anything that's in place. They have supported meetings then, and every new-starter who joins the college is associated to a mentor. They'll have another teacher who's been with us for some time who can support them along the way. They'll be observed in their first couple of weeks within the classroom, so they get that hands-on, sort of, initial observation to understand where they need to work forward. (HR, Mids)

I think they kind of embrace the qualification, because it is giving them the tools to do the job (HR, Mids)

Responses to problems with recruitment

Many participants acknowledged that it was a time of uncertainty for the sector since there was no clarity over Brexit, the levy on large usinessesn, or the precise design of new T level technical qualifications. Several interviewees expressed concern that their current teaching staff would almost all be reaching retirement age in the next few years and some had already started working on succession planning. The issue of the ageing VET profession is, though, both perennial and international. In Australia, Smith (2009) identified that VET teachers and trainers comprise an ageing workforce. In Switzerland in 2010 39 per cent of VET teachers

were over the age of 50 (Berger and D'Ascoli 2012, 318) while more than half of the vocational teachers and trainers in upper secondary schools in Sweden were over 50 (OECD 2010, 92). This ageing VET workforce largely reflects how people become teachers after a previous career, which is common throughout VET systems. Berger and D'Ascoli (2012, 319) in their international study of VET practitioners categorized the reasons for becoming VET teachers into a push from their former occupation and a pull from the new one. The push might be the deterioration of work conditions or the long-term effect of physical work and the pull might be that the circumstances of teaching were perceived as more pleasant than, for example, construction sites or engineering plants (Orr 2019). This does not imply that no problem exists, just that it is not new. In any case, given the need for industrial experience, recruiting many more younger SET teachers may be difficult in England and elsewhere.

Raising the salary that they could offer, within the constraints of fixed pay scales, was the most common solution colleges were exploring to solve the recruitment challenge. Market weighting was offered for the job area or supplements for specific skills. However, as this quote shows, what is offered may still not be sufficient:

> *…we have given them a market weighting, so they do attract a higher salary, as opposed to our other staff, who for example might teach in hospitality or hair and beauty or in the arts […] even though we offer market weighting, it is still not competitive and we have had some staff that have left and gone back to work in industry.* (HR, North)

This head of department highlighted the issue to which many others alluded – the difficulty of enhancing a salary package when FE colleges are under severe financial constraints.

Another strategy was to entice industry employees into teaching by having information evenings or offering them opportunities to try teaching out for themselves:

> *...we give them the opportunity to try it, by teaching – we do free courses on a Saturday for people who want to come and learn bricklaying, or, you know... So we do free courses and they are paid for by European funding. We get the 'industry practitioners', as we call them, to come in and have a go, and we put them through their teaching qual. – the first twelve weeks of it – and they see if they like it! Now, we have managed to get a couple of teachers that way*. (HR, South)

Several interviewees used the phrase "*growing our own*" to describe developing and recruiting teachers, for instance by encouraging cross-disciplinary skills in their own staff when posts proved hard to fill. Some had created a position referred to as apprentice teacher or equivalent, though these were not, apparently, formal apprenticeships. Increasingly, colleges were taking on staff with the industry experience and providing the teacher training input themselves:

We're just planning for next year at the moment and we are wanting to maybe have two or three apprentice teachers that we want to bring in and, you know, where they do… they are really good engineers or something, but they've decided that they wanted to start teaching. (Eng, North)

Colleges had also focused on recruiting from different target groups. The most widely used and reportedly most effective strategy was to attract older members of the industry workforce who did not want, or were not able, to carry on in a physical job:

> *A lot of them, as they get older, might want to teach, when their knees and backs and stuff start going*. (HR, South)

At the other end of the spectrum, approaching promising apprentices was suggested, but in practice the current wage disparity meant this approach was unlikely to be successful.

In some cases, current industry personnel were providing a small amount of teaching on their courses, either for a specific role or to act as short-term cover if necessary:

... people who've got their own business, they'll do a few casual hours alongside of their own business as well. (HR, North)

Well, it could be two hours a week. You know, it could be three hours a week. It could be one evening a week. It could be they come in specifically when we've got an engineering project to help us. So, they bring in very relevant and up-to-date experience of industry as we need that. (Eng, Mids)

Discussion

The great diversity of provision in English FE together with the relatively small sample drawn from the largest 50 colleges in England means the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, there was near unanimous recognition that recruiting suitably qualified teaching staff in areas like engineering was a challenge, while student numbers in those curriculum areas were, with some exceptions, generally stable or growing. This reflects how FE colleges are competing directly with industry for employees and many respondents stated that colleges were at a marked disadvantage in this contest, most notably due to the pay differential. At all levels of experience and seniority, industry was said to offer a much better financial package. The degree of discrepancy might vary by sector, but there was no area by respondents mentioned where the perception of this differential did not exist. Market weighting and supplements to salary for particular skills had been used to boost pay, although it was widely acknowledged that these could not usually bring rates up to parity with industry. Even if employees were tempted from industry into college, they were then faced with a number of challenges. Chief amongst these were the heavy workload and the administrative burden, which respondents indicated would not previously have been experienced by some recruits from

industry. Despite problems perceived in adapting to life as a teacher, most interviewees judged staff turnover to be relatively low.

One conspicuous finding from our study was that agencies were seen as part of the problem more than they are part of the solution for recruitment. They are costly both in terms of hourly pay and the finder's fee that applies if the college recruits through the agency. Interviewees described, moreover, how agencies were removing individuals from the open employment market exacerbating a difficult recruitment situation. The quality of agency staff was variable and CVs could not always be trusted to be accurate. Importantly, the reduced presence and availability of agency staff outside the classroom was sometimes seen as creating an additional load for college-employed colleagues.

The sweeping reforms anticipated in the Skills Plan involve the expansion of VET provision, which will be difficult to implement unless the problem of recruitment of staff is addressed. That will almost certainly require greater resources. Exacerbating these problems with recruitment, the participants described a turbulent and uncertain future. One of the key concerns was the effect of Brexit on the local engineering industry and more broadly the direction and rate of economic growth. Another concern was the lack of clarity about how employers would react to the government's levy on companies with large wage bills designed to fund apprenticeships.

What does all of this expose about the construction of policy for VET in England and its recurrent failure to achieve lasting change? There are three distinct elements and the first pertains to the evidence on which policy is based. Among the recommendations outlined by the Institute for Government to address policy churn was that "Policy announcements should be accompanied by the evidence base that underpins them." Policy changes, they continue, "fail to endure because they are rooted in insufficient prior analysis, and have been developed

in a policy process that is too restricted" (Norris and Adam 2017, 4). Sufficient prior analysis and a statutory requirement for evidence in the case of the Skills Plan might have exposed colleges' difficulties in recruiting sufficient numbers of properly experienced and qualified staff for existing SET provision. That in turn might have led to a more circumspect approach to reform based on what capacity for change currently exists or else a properly funded implementation of a wider expansion of provision. In the context of this study, properly funded implementation might improve SET teachers' salaries, reduce the discrepancy with industry and assist colleges in the recruitment of sufficient numbers of the necessary staff.

The government's Skills Plan, secondly, reveals a specific weakness associated with what has been termed "policy borrowing" (Raffe 2011 and see also Hodgson and Spours 2016). Raffe (2011, 1) described how a policy borrowing approach to the development of policy "searches the international experience for examples of a unique, transferable 'best practice'." These comparisons appear to be very attractive to makers of policy for English VET. The Skills Plan includes as an appendix the executive summary of the Sainsbury Report, which makes these statements:

> we have considered best practice in this country and across international systems and consulted hundreds of employers, providers and young people (p45)
>
> Routes through the best international technical education systems begin with a broad curriculum, then increasingly specialise as an individual progresses to higher levels of knowledge and skills. (p49)

These comparisons are reductive but in specific relation to VET this urge to peer overseas for inspiration can also lead to practical issues of local implementation being overlooked. Policy learning, by contrast, "supports the development of tailored national policies rather than policies taken off-the-peg" and partly by comparing international systems it "learns from a

country's own history, and develops forms of governance with effective communication between policy and practice" (op. cit.). What López-Guereñu (2018, 515) concluded about VET policy in the Basque Region of Spain could also be said of the UK.

> whenever addressing VET qualification reforms, a thorough contextualisation is required. That means grasping the particular interactions among key elements of a skills provision system (qualifications, curriculum, labour and education institutions, stakeholders) as well as the specific political and governance system, as they all mediate the outcome of the reforms.

While evaluating English VET against other countries' systems, that thorough contextualisation has not occurred, even at the most basic level of staffing.

The third element revealed is the prioritization of those who would implement the policy. Although the introduction of new T level qualifications was raised by one interviewee, the implementation of the Skills Plan more broadly did not feature significantly in the course of our interviews. These college managers were day-to-day expending considerable time, energy and resources on finding and keeping staff to preserve existing provision, which militates against the strategic development of provision envisioned in the Skills Plan. None of this is acknowledged in the policy. If the most fundamental concern of having properly experienced and qualified teachers in colleges is ignored then the comprehensive vision of technical pathways and qualifications that the Sainsbury Report and the Post-16 Skills Plan described might remain just that, a vision. And the churn of policy in the FE sector will continue.

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